

countryfocus



Simon Lelic talks to Robert Angel, president of the Gilford Group and board member of the CRMA, about the growth of knowledge management in Canada.

"Knowledge management has been mainstream in Canada for at least two decades, although it may not always have been called KM," says Robert Angel, president of the Gilford Group, a consultancy, and board member of the Customer Relationship Management Association (CRMA), Canada. Indeed, Angel's own involvement in the discipline reflects the way KM has infiltrated the corporate agenda in the country. As a marketing-strategy consultant specializing in client relationships and performance measurement, knowledge management forms a core part of his work. Likewise, the CRMA, in advocating an enterprise-wide, performance-management approach to customer relationships, cannot ignore the role of knowledge and knowledge management in achieving its goals.

It is this growing acceptance that knowledge drives so many core business functions that has in turn driven the uptake of knowledge management across the Canadian economy. Angel credits the larger consultancy firms in the country for their role in this process, although a handful of pioneering universities also deserve recognition for the part they have played in pushing knowledge management into the limelight. Similarly, as Angel says, a number of prominent exponents of KM, such as McMaster University's Nick Bontis and Ash Sookanan of BMO Financial, have done a great deal to raise the profile of the discipline.

In recent years, the term 'knowledge management' has achieved widespread recognition and acceptance. "Knowledge management has been drawing strength from such disciplines as data warehousing, customer-relationship management, human capital and balanced scorecard," says Angel. "It has also spurred software development around management and reporting." He concedes, though that it is still

primarily the larger firms and organ implemented KM-based initiatives; as in the UK and the US, the majority of smaller firms have yet to be to their operations.

Angel singles out the financial-services sector as the early leaders in the field; the Bank of Montreal and Clarica, for example, can in many ways be considered pioneers on a worldwide, let alone countrywide, basis. The healthcare industry, too, boasts a number of mature knowledge-management projects, while the consultancies and software companies continue to play a leading role. In terms of disseminating knowledge itself, Angel praises the efforts of both academia and the Canadian government although word has yet to spread as widely in the manufacturing industry as it has in the services-based sector.

Canada's proximity, geographically and linguistically, to the US has no doubt been a huge influence on the speed with which KM has spread in the country, as Angel readily accepts. In addition, however, Canada has a strong reputation for the level of management education professionals and would-be executives receive. And as Angel says, "Canada has had an active technology sector developing software for knowledge management for some time. The Canadian technology sector did not boom to the extent that Silicon Valley did in the 1990s, and has not suffered from the dotcom bust to the same extent in the past few years."

And while Angel knows of no Canadian publication dedicated exclusively to knowledge management, media coverage is otherwise reasonably extensive. "University and IT magazines regularly feature articles on KM, while the national newspapers' business sections do so from time to time, as do business publishers. A number of commercial business conference organizers, including Ark Group, have also recognised the demand for KM-based events in the country, and organise regular conferences and benchmarking trips accordingly. Angel himself gave a presentation at a KM conference in Toronto last month, for instance.

As Angel says, Canadians are, as a rule, well plugged into commercial developments around the world, and as management emerged as a corporate discipline in the UK, the US, Japan and so on, Canada has easily kept pace. Angel offers a word of warning: "KM still has a long way to go in Canada. It is gradually coalescing into discipline, but it is not yet a clearly defined responsibility within most organizations. We are also still a long way from being able to access and use increasing volumes of information within an organization." But then there is not a country in the world that can claim to have cracked that particular nut.